

BACKGROUND

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Breaking Ground: *The Community Food Security Movement*

by Christine Ahn*

The U.S. is the world's largest producer and exporter of food, yet in 2002, 35 million Americans didn't know where their next meal was coming from.¹ At the same time, nearly two-thirds of Americans were overweight. Although hunger is still a reality for those living in poverty, our food system has created a condition where "obesity is now a greater threat to the health and well-being of America's poor" than hunger.²

One reason the food system is so sick is that supermarkets are virtually nonexistent in poor communities. Wealthier neighborhoods have two to three times as many supermarkets as lower-income areas, and white neighborhoods have up to four times more supermarkets than African-American neighborhoods.³ Without access to nutritious food, poor communities will have unhealthy diets.⁴

Access to safe and nutritious food concerns not only America's poor. Approximately 2,000 Americans die each year from food poisoning caused by salmonella and E. coli, in part due to large-scale food processing.⁵ And in our industrialized, profit-maximizing agricultural system, mad cow disease has now become a reality.⁶

Today, just ten companies supply more than half the food and drink sold in the United States.⁷ Corporate consolidation of the food industry has reduced farmers to less than 1 percent of the U.S. population,⁸ and because production and distribution is so centralized, food now travels on average 1,500 to 2,500 miles from farm to plate in the U.S.⁹

Recognizing that dramatic changes aren't imminent in the profit-driven food system, a diverse network of activists across America have begun organizing for a just food system that benefits consumers and farmers. Family farm groups, food banks, community gardeners, nutritionists, environmentalists, and community development organizations are striving to achieve *community food security*¹⁰—a condition wherein everyone has a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritious diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice.¹¹

According to Andy Fisher, Executive Director of the Community Food Security Coalition, this movement, which has flowered in the past seven years, seeks to democratize food production and distribution by localizing food, using more sustainable and health-promoting practices, and meeting the needs of underserved communities.¹²



Photo by Tracy Barlow—Peoples' Grocery

Youth and staff from the Peoples' Grocery, Oakland, California.

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Dr. Joan Gussow, Professor Emerita of Nutrition at Columbia University and author of *This Organic Life* (2002), believes that “the Community Food Security movement is still small when compared to the power of...Wal-Mart, but all across the country, our growth can almost match theirs.”¹³

Innovative Models of Food Justice

Two trends form important pillars of the community food security movement: farmers’ markets and community supported agriculture programs (CSAs). Farmers’ markets, the most obvious outlets for farmers to earn a decent price for their produce, have grown from 1,774 to 3,100 in the past decade.¹⁴ CSAs, also known as subscription farms, allow consumers to buy advance shares of a farm’s harvest. They date back thirty years to Japan, where a group of women concerned about growing food imports, use of pesticides, and the corresponding decrease in the farming population organized a direct relationship with local farms. CSAs have since spread to Europe and to the U.S., where over 1,200 now flourish.¹⁵

The following are some snapshots of what community food security looks like in the United States.

New York’s Just Food

In 2003, 1.6 million people in New York state received emergency food, further stressing the soup kitchens and food pantries that fed 45 percent more people in 2002 than in 2000.¹⁶ And from 1987 to 1997, the state lost about a million acres of fertile farmland, displacing family farmers.

In response to these crises, Just Food began connecting farmers with urban families in the New York City area. Since 1996, Just Food has organized thirty community gardens and thirty-five CSAs, with each CSA supporting up to six regional farmers. During the harvest season, the CSA farmers deliver produce and meat—usually organic and always fresh—to a central distribution site in the city. According to Dr. Gussow, who chairs the Just Food board, demand has soared faster than local farmers can supply.¹⁷

Boston’s Food Project

Transforming vacant lots into lush city farms is a crucial way to feed a rapidly growing urban population, and the Boston-based Food Project has become a national inspiration to other inner city communities. In 1991, the first growing season yielded 4,000 pounds of food from 2.5 acres of detoxified soil. By 2001, the Food Project was growing 209,000

pounds of organic food on a twenty-one-acre farm and three city lots. The project donates 55 percent of the food to fifteen homeless shelters and soup kitchens, sells 5 percent at reasonable prices at inner city farmers’ markets, and distributes the rest to 225 CSA shareholders.

The Food Project also gives youth a chance to learn urban farming, work in Boston homeless shelters, and run city farmers’ markets. As youth coordinator Anim Steele puts it, “We need to involve young people because they will inherit our practices, and they need to learn that alternatives exist.”¹⁸

Oakland’s Peoples’ Grocery

Hamburgers, pizza, Chinese take-out, and donuts are some of the most accessible foods for West Oakland, California’s 30,000 predominantly African American and Latino residents. This impoverished neighborhood has just one grocery store, forty liquor stores, and a handful of fast food restaurants.¹⁹

In response, community activists started Peoples’ Grocery, a community garden and mobile market in the heart of West Oakland. They transformed a 4,000 square foot vacant lot into a garden that now grows seasonal fruits and vegetables and educates youth and residents about urban renewal, food justice, and revitalizing the local economy. They also operate a mobile market on wheels that runs on bio-diesel fuel and sells fresh produce, staple goods, and healthy snacks from local farmers and urban farmers’ markets.

According to co-founder Brahm Ahmadi, Peoples’ Grocery was founded “with the long-term goal of building community self-reliance in West Oakland. We’ve chosen food as an organizing tool for our work because it is personal and universal to everyone and is fundamental to the inner workings of a community.”²⁰

Junk Food or Just Food? Feeding Our Children

As Ahmadi says, the community food security movement is about organizing, and the community doesn’t stop at the school gates.

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USDA, photo by Ken Hammond

Residents of Chicago public housing work in their community vegetable garden.

Nationwide, a coalition of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community and health advocates are pressing for farm-to-school programs that help local farmers supply schools with nutritious food. In 1997, the Santa Monica–Malibu Unified School District became the first to stock fresh produce from a farmers’ market in the salad bars of all its nine schools. Over 700 school districts across America now participate in farm-to-school programs,²¹ and the trend is spreading to universities and other public institutions, including the Connecticut Department of Corrections.

Since 1999, the Berkeley Unified School District has purchased from local farmers to feed its 10,000 students. Berkeley also serves fresh food in its cafeterias through school gardens, such as the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School’s Edible Schoolyard, founded by Chez Panisse chef Alice Waters.

In Los Angeles, the organizing efforts of students, parents, and teachers resulted in a ban on sales of soda and junk food in cafeterias and student stores throughout the school district. Other districts are considering such a ban.

This organizing is in response to an estimate that one-third of our nation’s 23,000 public schools sell fast food to students, often because tight food budgets lead administrators to resort to cheap, highly processed food.²² In Los Angeles—which serves fast food to its students—75 percent of students participate in the USDA’s National School Lunch Program, which reimburses L.A. schools approximately \$33 million per year, thereby subsidizing the sale of fast food to children. Since school breakfast and lunch are often the only meals low income children get all day, the impact on the health of poor students is potentially disastrous. As fifteen-year-old Rosa Villar, a Los Angeles high school student, put it, “If schools are responsible for teaching kids to say no to drugs, tobacco, and alcohol, then why don’t they tell kids to say no to fast food?”²³

Clearly, change is needed on a large scale, including at the level of the National School Lunch Program. Groups within the movement have successfully pressed for national legislation, such as the Com-



Collard greens grown on Chicago's south side.

munity Food Security Act of the 1996 Farm Bill, authorizing \$16 million in USDA-funded grants over seven years to support projects that provide fresher, more nutritious food in poor neighborhoods and help communities meet their own food needs. Advocates succeeded in doubling this amount in the 2002 Farm Bill. They are now pressing for federal

funds to assist schools with the extra costs of purchasing directly from local farmers and for transit programs and distribution centers to improve food access in both urban and rural low income communities.

The Way Forward

Organizing around food is often a catalyst for addressing broader social and economic justice issues, such as access to affordable housing and public transportation. The proliferation of local food projects, farmers’ markets, CSAs, farm-to-school programs, and progressive public policies aimed at both supplying wholesome food to all and stemming the loss of family farms should restore hope that, as Andy Fisher says, “another food system is possible.”²⁴

These stories do not just describe isolated pockets of change. The fusing of the community food security and justice movement with the movement challenging globalization and corporate hegemony could spell the beginning of the end of the industrial food system.

USDA photo by Jack Deliano

Community Food Security Movement Resources

Community Food Security Coalition
Tel: 310-822-5410
<http://www.foodsecurity.org/>

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)
Tel: 301-504-6559
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa/>

Farmers’ Markets
To find a farmers’ market in your area, go to
<http://www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets/map.htm>

Farm to School Program
To support funding for this program, go to
http://www.foodsecurity.org/action_alert.html

Community Alliance with Family Farmers
Tel: 530-756-8518
<http://www.caff.org/>

Just Food, New York
Tel: 212-645-9880
<http://www.justfood.org/>

The Food Project, Boston
Tel: 617-442-1322
<http://www.thefoodproject.org/>

Peoples’ Grocery, Oakland
Tel: 510-420-8622
<http://www.peoplesgrocery.org>

Notes

- 1 Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson, *Household Food Security in the United States, 2002*, Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report Number 35, (Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Program, United States Department of Agriculture and Economic Research Service, October 2003), 16.
- 2 Kelly Brownell and Katherine Battle Horgen, *Food Fight*, (McGraw Hill, 2004), 207.
- 3 Brownell and Horgen, 209.
- 4 K. Morland, S. Wing, A. Diez Roux, and C. Poole, "Neighborhood Characteristics Associated with the Location of Food Stores and Food Services Places," *Journal of Preventive Medicine* 22 (2002): 23–29.
- 5 Elizabeth Simpson and Henning Sehmsdorf, "Nutrition—Body and Soul," opening remarks at the national conference "Farm to Cafeteria: Healthy Farms, Healthy Students," Seattle, October 4, 2002.
- 6 Verlyn Klinkenborg, "Holstein Dairy Cows and the Inefficient Efficiencies of Modern Farming," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2004.
- 7 Russell Shorto, "A Short-Order Revolutionary," *The New York Times Magazine*, January 11, 2004.
- 8 Shorto.
- 9 For an excellent analysis of the vulnerability of our food system, see Brian Halweil's *Home Grown: The Case For Local Food In A Global Market* (Washington, DC: World-Watch Institute, 2002).
- 10 Andy Fisher, "Community Food Security: A Promising Alternative to the Global Food System," *Community Food Security Newsletter*, Spring 2003.
- 11 Definition by Mike Hamm and Anne Bellows from Andy Fisher.
- 12 Interview, January 22, 2004.
- 13 Interview, January 22, 2004.
- 14 Halweil, 38.
- 15 Margot Roosevelt, "Fresh Off the Farm," *Time* 162, no. 18 (November 3, 2003): 60.
- 16 Just Food website <http://www.justfood.org>
- 17 Interview, January 22, 2004.
- 18 Interview, January 13, 2004.
- 19 Interview with Brahm Ahmadi, January 26, 2004.
- 20 Interview, January 26, 2004.
- 21 Bob Gottlieb, "Farm to School Update," *Community Food Security Newsletter*, Spring 2003: 13.
- 22 Marion Kalb, Farm to School Program, interview, January 7, 2004.
- 23 Francesca de la Rosa, Center for Food Justice, interview, January 8, 2004.
- 24 Interview, January 22, 2004.

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